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DE RUEHLM #2050/01 3461117
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4895
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0333
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7158
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 4963
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1567
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002050

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/12/2016

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: JAFFNA UNIVERSITY STAFF, STUDENTS
COUNTER TIGER IMAGE

REF: COLOMBO 2043

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

1. (C) Summary: Jaffna Government Agent Mr. K. Ganesh hosted a panel discussion on December 7 with Jaffna University faculty and students and the Ambassador. Classes have been suspended at the University since August 11, when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) attacked the crossing point from their territory to the government-held Jaffna Peninsula. The Vice Chancellor contested the image of Jaffna University students as young Tamil Tigers, asserting their commitment to learning. Students expressed fear of violence and abductions by security forces and paramilitaries. The Dean of Arts and Culture noted that security forces play into the LTTE's hand by intimidating students and disrupting education, leading underemployed students to turn toward the LTTE. End summary.

Countering an Image

2. (C) Jaffna's Government Agent (GA) hosted a panel discussion December 7 with the Ambassador and Jaffna University faculty and students, including the Vice-Chancellor, the deans of four faculties, and four students. The GA offered his office as a venue after police told RSO they could not guarantee the Ambassador's safety at the university. Answering the question of safety, Vice Chancellor R. Kumaravadevel told Ambassador that the security forces "try to create a bad impression of Jaffna University students. Maybe they are trying to show you that JU is a dangerous place for you -- it is not. Of course a few are pro-LTTE, but most are keen to study and settle down in life. Tamils have always given high importance to education." He added that there is room for such a small percentage of qualified students in Sri Lanka's universities that those who gain admission are committed to their education.

3. (C) The GA pointed out that Jaffna University, which remained open prior to the ceasefire, has been closed for teaching purposes since August 2006 for only the second time in the history of the civil war. (The university closed briefly in 1995, but remained open during the height of hostilities between 1985-87.) Of Jaffna University's 5300 students, 1300 come from "uncleared" areas in the LTTE-controlled Vanni. These students are presently not able to travel on to the peninsula due to the closure of the A9. Further, hostel space is limited, and Jaffna residents

hesitate to rent rooms to students because of the security situation because the authorities believe the university is infiltrated by the LTTE.

Students, Not Tigers

14. (C) One student, Kushanathan (protect), told us that security forces regularly enter the Jaffna University campus, where students have been photographed, videoed, and their personal data noted down. He said that security forces regularly harass and search students on the roadside, to the point that they hesitate to show their student ID cards. "We show our National Identity Cards instead. If we show our student IDs they automatically assume we're Tigers." The GSL transferred 140 Sinhalese and Muslim students out of Jaffna University after hostilities escalated on August 11, leaving only Tamil students. Kushanathan said, "We fear being isolated from the other communities." He described an incident in September in which a grenade was thrown into a JU hostel after curfew, from an area secured by the SLA. Other students echoed Kushanathan's sentiments, but said they were afraid to speak out.

Fueling the Tiger Propaganda Machine

15. (C) The Assistant Dean of Arts and Culture countered the assumption that JU is a natural breeding ground for the LTTE. She said, "Everyone knows that LTTE cadres are young, so the SLA naturally suspects students from the Vanni. But the first sounds of peace came from the university. Jaffna rejected violence until the GSL rejected education for

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Tamils, who had a tradition of academic excellence." She tied the roots of the Tamil militant movement to the GSL's educational "standardization" program of the 1970s, which effectively placed a ceiling on the number of Tamil students admitted to public universities. She added, "Every time education is affected, more students take up violence. Now the security forces are employed to make sure students' mouths are shut to politics. Everyone is afraid to speak publicly."

16. (C) COMMENT: The suspension of classes at Jaffna University since August 11 contributes to the lack of a sense of normalcy among the Tamil community in Jaffna, who have traditionally placed great value on education. Moreover, as the faculty of the university attest, the listlessness and growing anger of 5300 motivated students unable to study and subject to harassment by the security forces plays directly into the LTTE's propaganda machine. End comment.

BLAKE